4-2015

Michael Glancy: The Perfect Object

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MICHAEL CLANCY

THE PERFECT OBJECT

interview by LEDA CEMPELLIN
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You have been a student of Dale Chihuly. How did you meet him?

In 1968 Chihuly was the first American glassblower to be invited to work in the prestigious Venini factory In Murano, Venice, and the following year he established the glass program at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD). In 1971 I picked up a blow pipe and blew my first piece of hot glass in Denver, Colorado, where I was studying as a business major. After my graduation in 1974, I went to meet with Chihuly in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he was building a glass shop for the School for American Indian Arts. That same year I enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design and began studying with him. It was Chihuly's influence that motivated students to go to the library and internalize the history of glass.

How did you manage to synthesize the European and the American glasswork traditions?

At the time, everybody blew glass independently. Chihuly brought from Murano the model of the master being assisted by a team. During the Eighties, my participation at Dale's Pilchuck Glass School in the West Coast introduced me to a host of European glass masters, and ultimately led me to working with Jan Erik Ritzman in Sweden, a collaboration that I am very proud to be part of since 1987 and to this day. During my time at RISD, I also encountered the work that Maurice Marinot made in the Thirties, as well as Sasanian - Persian glass work from the IV-V centuries. My piece *Reverberating Nexus*, 1989, represents a response to the influences of Marinot and the glass of the Sasanians.

How has the combination of base-object occurred?

When I was a student, I was not proficient at glassblowing. I would make primitive hot glass objects and then re-work them in the cold shop, where I could cut, engrave, and manipulate them until satisfied. In 1980, preparing for my Master's presentation at RISD, I would go to a commercial window glass shop and buy inexpensive glass sheets, which I viewed as 'papers' to practice carving and engraving, in preparation for the blown pieces that I was making. In my studio while contemplating one of my blown objects, I realized that there was a relationship between the blown glass piece and one of the glass sheet drawings even though they were made a year and a half apart. I took the blown glass object and placed it on the glass sheet; it suddenly became an environment. This object was exhibited in my graduate thesis show, and six months later in my first New York exhibition at the Heller Gallery. The day before the show opened, I saw a curator from the Metropolitan Museum pick up the object, lifting it from the base plate and immediately requesting to acquire it. I knew this was something I should pursue.

How does the preparatory process for your pieces work? Do you make two separate drawings for the base and for the object?

Since the glass is transparent, with a design in both the front and the back, compositionally I have to know exactly where everything is, so those base plates are drawn in detail before being carried out. In regards to the objects themselves, I have sketches of certain pieces, but I don't always execute formal drawings.

Could you roughly sum up the complex technique to make these exquisite and visually complex pieces?

Let's look closely at the process for *Cloisonné Cadence*, 2011. Adhesive rubber stencil patterns are applied onto the piece with a liquid adhesive. With a sand blaster, a hard abrasive is pushed with compressed air against the stenciled glass. The abrasive bounces off the rubber to protect and preserve the glass while chipping the exposed surface. An electrically conductive paint used to make printed circuit boards is applied to the object and when the stencil is removed, the piece is electroformed in a chemical bath. The carved area with the conductive layer – uncoated glass is an insulator – is charged negatively becoming a "cathode" while bars of copper in the bath are charged positively becoming the "anode" – allowing metal to be transferred from anode to cathode over time.

The skills of your assistants are quite different than yours. May we expand on your role as the artist versus those of your assistants?

The skills of my assistants are quite different from mine, but they are all attracted to working with their hands. Adrienne Evans is an artist herself, who contributes her skillset of mold making and working with wax – her wax models are cast in glass. Myles Baer has been an assistant with me since he was sixteen, and he is in his eighteenth year in my studio. He is a third-generation mason, and as such he has developed extraordinary skills in engraving, cutting and polishing glass. I tell Adrienne and Myles what to do and hardly ever make the mistake of telling them how to do it; in the past I trained them to acquire these skills, but now they are taking these skills very far on their own.

With three professionals working in your studio, what is the average time to make one piece from beginning to the end?

Well, I make about ten to twelve objects - either blown or cast - on a base plate a year. Scale may get in the way of speed; if I work in large scale, like an object 11-inches high on a 20-inch base plate, I would make only two or three of these pieces a year. At any given time, there may be ten pieces that are evolving in my studio, each in a different stage.

You are also a faculty at RISD. What is your advice as a teacher?

To embrace error, learn through mistakes, and to never give up. It takes a lot of effort. The rock of my creative life is to work every day.

What does your work represent for you?

Hanging in my studio is a photo of a piece in glass from Pompeii. My assistant and I often refer to it as the perfect object, which links my studio in Rehoboth, Massachusetts in the year 2015 with a studio in Pompeii in the first century AD, before Vesuvius erupted. I am trying to make something that is perfect like this Pompeii object. We have such a short time on this planet that I'm trying to leave behind something that shows that I was here, participating.

Would you show us your most recent work and tell us the direction it is taking?

Last spring there was an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum celebrating Carlo Scarpa's collaboration with Venini in the Thirties and Forties. I have been working on an object that is based on a piece designed by Scarpa. Books that I had seen show the piece only in profile; when I actually saw it in real life, it had an elliptical shape and was much smaller than I imagined!
I made three alternative designs that I assumed Scarpa might have considered himself. It's exciting, a wonderful way to connect with visionaries that are no longer on the planet. The piece will be finished in a year or so. *(More on the artist's work at http://michaelglancyglassworks.com/work/)*

Left to right: "Melding Impetus" 1994, engraved blown glass, industrial plate glass, copper and gold leaf 13"h x 18"l x 18"d, collection: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, ph Christoph Markwalder, Basel; courtesy the artist; Michael Clancy in his studio, courtesy the artist